

TO RUSSIA...WITH BOOKS, ARCHIVES, AND LIBRARIES

by Susan Leach-Murray



It is difficult to believe that just a few months ago I took an amazing trip to Russia. I visited both Moscow and St. Petersburg in July 2005. Spending five days in each city, the demanding schedule consisted of visits to libraries, museums, archives, and other famous tourist attractions. I hope that this brief trip description will give you some insight into the amazing features of Moscow and St. Petersburg, especially libraries and archives, and will inspire you to visit someday.

This trip began about one year ago when I learned that the Graduate School of Library and Information Science (GSLIS) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign was hosting a trip to Russia. The trip, entitled "Soviet secrets, Russian revelations: An inside view of information and access in the new Russia," focused on visiting libraries and archives. Marianne Steadley, the Continuing Professional Program director for GSLIS, coordinated the trip with Ekaterina (Katya) Genieva, the director general of the Library of Foreign Literature located in Moscow. In addition, a retired GSLIS professor and a long-time friend of Katya's, Marianna Tax Choldin, also helped organize the trip.

One of the first things I noticed about Russia in mid-July was that, generally, most of the libraries and archives I visited were not air-conditioned. The only ventilation was through open windows. The temperature in my hotel room, which did not have air-conditioning either, hovered around 80 degrees at night. Another feature I noticed about the Russian libraries and archives was the way staff very casually showed us valuable items. That casualness made me wonder if they have standard policies of preservation of historic items. Although the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg has their older items in cloth-draped display cases, other libraries and archives house valuable artifacts in regular stacks. I do not know how common this practice is throughout Russia; at least in the Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts, I was

able to observe directly that a newly renovated area is temperature-controlled.

Since it would be impossible to describe all the places we visited, I am limiting my discussion to just three places: the State Archives of the Russian Federation, the American Center of Russia located in the State Library of Foreign Literature, and St. Petersburg Library for the Blind. When we arrived at Moscow's State Archives of the Russian Federation, we could not immediately enter the building, but had to wait for permission of the archive-storage director, Larisa V. Kryachkov. Before her arrival, each of us had to present our passport for the official record of our meeting. Once inside the building that housed Kyrachkov's office, she led us to a small conference room where we sat around a rectangular table. The items that she showed us were nothing short of unbelievable. It is difficult to fathom the kinds of artifacts that not just this archive, but many other Russian archives and libraries hold. Coming from a relatively young country, it is easy to forget how far back Russian history goes, with some items in the Russian collections dating to the 14th and 15th centuries.



Travel group photo to Katya's dacha. Author seated, second person on right side raising glass.

A brief listing of what I saw includes a lock of Nicholas II's baby hair, a watercolor print of his wife Alexandra, cloth envelopes kept by his mother, and a fan letter written to Anastasia, his youngest daughter, from an eleven year old girl from Kansas. In addition to these items, I saw various letters by well known persons including one written and signed in 1812 by Beethoven, Charles Dickens' correspondence to John Bowling dated 1870, a letter by Verdi written in 1862, Napoleon's official military correspondence dated 1794, along with an example of music by the composer, Paginini, from 1829.

These are just the tip of the iceberg of this archive's collection, which holds about one million items from the 1917 pre-revolutionary period. Only about four percent of these files are closed, i.e., not accessible to the general public or researchers. The general collection itself covers the 19th and 20th century, but retains private collections dating to the 15th century. According to Professor Tax Choldin, private collections came to be housed in Russian archives or libraries because the collections were seized for the "collective" state archives. A revolutionizing aspect of the "new" Russia is the lessening accessibility of archived documents. Larisa Kryachkov explained that it was easier to examine archival documents before 1991 because the decision to allow access to any item was authorized by the archives departmental personnel. President Yeltsin has dictated restriction to many documents such as those pertaining to Communist Party information. Thus, the level of authority of the archival staff is diminished, increasing the bureaucratic red tape to documents and making it more difficult to release a document.

The second location that we visited in Moscow was



Author in Moscow on far left with flowered skirt.

the American Center. Located within the Library of Foreign Literature (LTL), it is not the only foreign establishment located inside the LTL. The Japanese Embassy Center and the BBC World Service are also located there. Although Marisa Fushille, the Center's director, does not have a degree in library science, she was a Russian language instructor at the University of Texas before moving to Moscow. Even though this center is smaller than most American public libraries, it is based upon the American library model (American Center, 2005). Founded in June 1993, it offers reference services and also hosts cultural and educational programs. The Center provides information about the United States in the form of books and magazines, art exhibits, and cultural events (American Center, Moscow, 2005). The Center has about 10,000 volumes and receives about 90 periodicals. Some of the items located in the Center are dated. The person on duty explained that library staff do not participate in collection development, instead, the items in the collection are sent directly to the American Center. No mention was made of who actually chooses the material. There are also three Internet computers available for patron use.

American Centers are operated and funded through the U.S. State Department. Slavyana Sagankyan, Director of American Center Yekaterinburg, presented a paper at the American Library Association's 2002 annual conference that explained the mission of the program was "to provide Russians with accurate and up-to-date information about political, economic, cultural, educational and social life in the United States and to provide Americans who travel, work, or live in Russia with versatile information support" (2002). For more information about the American Centers in Moscow, visit their website at: www.amc.ru.

One of the last libraries we visited was the St. Petersburg State Library for the Blind. This library, currently located in a renovated church building with beautiful stained glass windows, is situated on different floors of the building. According to the director, Eugenia Shepovalova, there are apartment tenants still residing here. The library, which includes eight branches and more than 50 small network libraries, serves 2,500 children and 8,500 adults, and offers 100,000 audio books, 100,000 books in Braille, 163 magazines, and 71 newspapers, as well as printed books, discs, slides, and CD-ROMs (Saint-Petersburg State Library for the Blind, n.d.). Their public technology room has ten computers with free access for all patrons. Besides access to the library's catalog and the Internet, there is specialized equipment to be used free-of-charge. This includes a machine that converts the printed page into Braille and a CCTV machine designed to read printed books aloud to patrons by scanning the page and producing audio sound to the listener. In

addition to the collection and availability of computers, the library also houses an archival collection.

It was a wonderful ten days and left me with not only amazing images about which to reminisce, but with some thoughts to ponder. Directors in Russian libraries and archives, just like their American counterparts, struggle with financial difficulties. In the post-Soviet period budgetary constraints remain a problem. Larisa Kryachkov at the Russian State Archives explained that her current department includes nine employees, down from sixteen during the Soviet period. Katya Genieva said that she seeks additional monies, sometimes grants, to help defray the costs of personnel. If she does not do something to help finance salaries, she could easily lose her staff to foreign firms who offer more lucrative salaries than libraries can pay. Larisa Kryachka, as archive-storage chief, makes \$300 dollars a month. With goods and services now based on a free market economy, Moscow is an expensive city so it would be difficult to live on such a low salary. However, even with the financial difficulties and the low salaries, library staff remain passionate about their work. It is difficult to convey the passion that I observed from the many library directors and staff that I met. Is this passion as obvious in the American field of librarianship? I often struggle with how to convey this passion in my everyday duties of cataloging items for others to access and I suspect other librarians grapple with this, too. A question to ponder is how can we get back the passion and enthusiasm for librarianship that first brought us into the field?

In conclusion, I would like to give my heartfelt thanks to all the individuals who made my first Russian trip so memorable. I will never forget my experience. Spasibo!

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